**Juno Steel and the Spell in Bone**
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# Juno Steel and the Spell in Bone

by Adaris


Summary

When trying to solve a simple matter of littering, mermaid detective Juno Steel uncovers a deeper conspiracy he isn't sure if he can solve. He has a new partner, winged-folk Rex Glass, to help him out, but too much of this rests on Juno's ability to deal with his own past. It's starting to look like the whole Martian Sea may be in trouble.


Notes

See the end of the work for notes

# The Island

"Where are you going, Juno?" Sasha sighed, sounding more tired than curious.

Juno flicked his tail, and his peach and pink fins floated around him, weightless in the water. "Come on, Sasha, can't you let a lady have his secrets?"

"See, now you just made your destination like the most interesting thing ever by saying that," Mick commented. He swam towards Juno, half-moon tail slicing through the water. Like a giant tuna. "Spill! We're super curious, aren't we, Sasha?"

Sasha smiled and showed off a row of sharp teeth. "Yes, very."

Mick rolled onto his back, exposing his silvery belly. "C'mon, Juno. Juno Juno Juno." He gave Juno a nudge with his pectoral fin, and Juno dodged with a quick flick of his tail.

"Cut it out, Mick!"

"We're going to find out anyway, even if you try to leave us behind. We're the faster swimmers," Sasha pointed out. She circled above both him and Mick, casting a sharklike shadow over them.

Mick flipped over again, ventral side down, and the stripes that ran along his flanks flashed blue in the afternoon light. "Give us the details! Or I'm going to make up a long, long story about what I think you're doing, and believe me, it's gonna get real weird."

Juno scowled and kept swimming. "I'm just going to the shore to get some oysters. Rita's favorite. That's all there is to it."

"Is that it? Seriously? Then why be so secretive? And why are you making for the Expanse instead of the shoreline?"

"'Cause the two of you can be annoying as hell, and I didn't want you following me around," he retorted.

"Oh," Mick said, ready to back down.

Sasha flicked her tail at him. "You aren't getting rid of us that easily, Juno."

"You aren't? No, you aren't!" Mick drifted up in the water column next to Sasha. "Not like we have anything to do today anyway."

"Fine. See if I care." Juno huffed and swam off in a flash of peach and rose-pink. On Benzaiten, it had all looked very glamorous—probably the reason why he had been such a successful dancer. They shared—had shared—the same frilly, lacy fins that trailed through in the water. Sparkling, iridescent scales dotted Juno's maroon tail, with darker ones on his dorsal side and caudal fin that shimmered in the sun. Juno was always swatting his fins away from his face or catching them on corals, and people were always *finding him* . He was too easy to pick out from a crowd. If he'd been some kind of scombriform or even an elasmobranch, no one would have looked twice at him, but here he was.

He hadn't been going to the shore. Sure, the shallows had the best shellfish near the reef, but did he look like a person who had time to harvest oysters? Juno was solving a *mystery* .

"Jay, you're ruffling again, buddy. What's up?" Mick asked, coming up beside Juno.

"I told you, I'm foraging," he snapped.

The continental shelf rose sharply from the seafloor, sloping up towards the shallows. Juno swam towards the shoreline, where oysters clustered against the rocks with various kinds of seaweed and kelp, with Sasha and Mick following behind.

"I don't think that's it," Mick reflected. "You're doing that thing with your finlets, where you flap 'em around like they're a skirt. I'm kind of an expert in figuring out when people are annoyed with me, so, like… yeah." He drifted towards the oyster beds, giving one or two of the shells a nudge.

Juno stilled the fins that ran halfway down his tail, which *had* been ruffling in a vaguely skirt-like fashion. "So?"

"You're thinking about something, and it's not oysters."

"Dammit, Mick." Juno worried at an oyster without much energy. "Look, I was just, um… thinking about finding a new case. It's been pretty slow recently, nothing more interesting than lost catfish and moray eels. Getting kind of boring."

"Eeh, I'm sure it'll pick up soon." Mick abandoned the oysters and

started to braid strands of seaweed together, probably into a bracelet or something equally useless. "I wouldn't worry about it. Although I've never really understood how people can manage to lose their pet morays. They always come back to their little eel caves."

Juno had to stop himself from rolling his eyes, which Ben always said made him look petulant. "I'm sure they manage it somehow."

"Yeah, I guess. Either way, if I ever got a pet, it would be a hagfish. They're so soft and good to pet!" Mick beamed at Juno. "I think they would be a lot of fun."

"That's even worse. You understand how that's worse, right?"

"What's worse…?" Sasha squinted at them like she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

"Mick's new slimy pet," Juno said dryly.

Sasha made the same expression Juno had made. "I really don't want to know."

They all halfheartedly harvested oysters, each knowing that they weren't really here for shellfish.

After he'd collected a dozen or so, Juno excused himself by saying, "Wow, great having fun with you guys! I think I'll go home, though."

"Juno—" Sasha started to protest.

"Seriously, guys. No funny business, I promise." He gave them a reasonably sincere smile; he'd been practicing in the mirror.

After a long, long moment, Sasha said, "Fine. See you later, Juno," in the tone of voice that implied she'd be watching him anyway. Somehow. Probably using her Dark Matters restricted spell clearance.

Mick waved and said, "Bye, Jay!" without any subterfuge. Which was a relief, frankly.

Juno flicked his tail and disappeared in a flurry of bubbles. Finally, he was free, free to explore the mystery that was growing off the coast of —

"Mistah Steel!"

"Rita?" Juno squawked. No, he *demanded* , in a voice that did not

crack even a little bit. That was definitely what happened. "Rita, what are you doing here?"

"I thought we was gonna solve the mystery of why all that junk's been showing up near that island, boss." Rita flapped her chubby little fins at him. She looked something like a manta ray, with a long, broad fin on either side of her body, but she also had a dorsal fin and flukes like a dolphin. Probably a hybrid, although she never said, and Juno didn't want to pry.

Neither of them were particularly fast swimmers, which was a nice change from Mick and Sasha's usual speed.

Juno tried to drift ahead a bit. "I was going to check that out by myself."

"No!!" Rita tried to smack Juno with a fin but missed spectacularly. "It's not safe out there, boss. I gotta stay with you in case anything happens!"

He looked down at Rita's small, round, not-manta-or-shark form, clumsily wiggling through the ocean, and he brushed a fin companionably over hers. "Yeah, with you around, I'm safe as houses."

"You bet, boss." Rita beamed. "Hey, got any snacks?"

"Uh, actually, yes." He handed her the oysters he'd gathered earlier.

"Man, you're the best gal I know!" she enthused, already cracking one open with expert speed.

Despite himself, Juno smiled. "Thanks, Rita."

They swam together mostly in silence, with Rita tossing the occasional empty shell behind her. Golden light filtered through the water, comfortably warm on Juno's scales. The shore receded into the distance, the pale golden sand fading into the soft, dusty turquoise of the open ocean. They had to swim all the way around the Tethys Expanse, a steep dropoff (more of an underwater pit than anything) between the reef and their destination. Unlike the rest of the tropical sea near Hyperion Reef, the Expanse was always cold, somehow, and the water that welled up there tasted like rotten fish. Nobody swam there, not even in an emergency. There were all kinds of stories about what lived in the Expanse, although Juno was pretty sure it was just gross cold water.

While they were near the vast blue pit, Rita swam so close to Juno that she kept brushing against his fins, nibbling on her oysters nervously. She trailed shells like some kind of strange otter, watching them drift to the seabed.

"Don't litter," Juno said reflexively.

"They're biodegradable, Mistah Steel," she reminded him. "Hey, is that your island?" She pointed at the sandy slope dotted with rocks and bits of wood in front of them. "What's it called, Ju… Ju… Juice Box Island!"

"Juventas." Juno flicked his tail and swam down to take a closer look at the pieces of wood. Some of them had long metal spikes in them, rusted from so long in the ocean. There were maybe five or six colors of wood, varying ages and grain structure. Some were marked by long scratches cutting through the slime on the sides that had faced the water.

Rita followed him, playing with a handful of sand and bits of seaweed rather than investigating. "Hey, boss, why'd'ya even come out here in the first place, anyway? It's real far from the reef, and so close to the Expanse, you can still smell it. I don't see why anyone would even bother coming this way."

"You just said it."

"Oh. If you wanted some time alone to think or something, I…" Rita's fins drooped.

Juno mentally smacked himself. "No, it's fine, I just—sometimes the reef gets too crowded."

"Mmm." She nudged at some smaller wood fragments on the seabed.

"Hey, I don't mind when it's just you," he said, patting her shoulder.

"Oh, well, that's good!" Rita grinned again, and Juno had to wonder how she didn't get mood whiplash. "What do you think about all these weird pieces of wood? Like, maybe a whole bunch of trees exploded, all at once, and the fragments went up so high in the air that they're still raining down!"

Juno took a second to absorb that. "Yeah, uh, that's… within the realm of possibility."

"Or maybe there was a merchant ship that got hijacked by pirates, and they got into a big fight, and both ships blasted each other apart with their cannons, pow-pow-pow! And now we gotta find all the treasure that sank to the bottom, and we're gonna be rich!" She swam in an excited loop, sending up a flurry of bubbles with her tail.

"Could be." Juno picked up a random shard of glass and squinted at it; something dark blue was smeared along one edge.

As she chatted, Rita started collecting bits of wood and shells in her arms. Then something made her squeal with happiness and drop everything. "Oh, it's so pretty!"

"What is it?" Juno was thinking a particularly shiny piece of glass.

Rita oohed softly over the thing in her hands. "It's magic. Looks like it chipped off a really big spell." She held it out for Juno to inspect.

It was a four-inch-long chip of old, grey bone, having come from something larger. Much, much larger. A red glow surrounded the bone, and the faint lines of a spell diagram crisscrossed its surface.

"See, you can tell that it's really strong magic, because it's so old and still so bright! Most spells fade after a year or two, but this one's been protected from degradation because it's imbued with so much energy. Could be really old." She picked up the bone again and closed her eyes. The bright, sunshine-yellow sparks of her magic flickered over it, and she said, "Yep! This thing is definitely centuries old. That's so cool!"

"So… what did it come from? Who could even work that kind of magic anymore?"

She grinned the kind of smile that meant she would break into any secure facility to find out. "Absolutely no clue, but we can check it out if you—"

The seafloor quaked, and the entire ocean shook like a five-gallon aquarium in an earthquake.

"Boss, what was that?"

A chunk of wood the size of Juno's desk hit the sand, sending splinters flying through the air.

Rita shrieked and tried to dodge away from them, but there was more

debris hailing down on them from the Expanse.

" *Rita!* " he yelled, and it happened again. Ruby energy burst in a shockwave around him, slamming into the debris and knocking it away. Unfortunately, Rita was in the way too, and the energy flung her away.

"FuckfuckfuckfuckRITA!" Juno darted after her as fast as his fins could take him. "Rita, come on, please say something."

Why did this always happen to him? He couldn't let Rita get hurt because of something he did. "Rita?" It was always his fault that bad things happened—

"Mistah Steel?" a familiar voice asked from below.

Juno dove down in the water column just as Rita came up, fins ruffling. "You scare me like that again, the stress is gonna kill me," he tried to scold, but he choked on the words. "I'm sorry."

"I'll try not to, I promise." She bumped against his chest, and he hugged her so tight she squeaked. "I missed you too. For the ten seconds I was gone."

"I just aged like thirty years in those whole ten seconds."

"It's alright, I know you didn't mean to, and I didn't get hurt like at all." Rita smiled up at Juno. "But… what just happened? Is it gonna happen again?"

The water shook again.

Juno grabbed her hand and started swimming. "I don't know, and I really don't want to stick around to find out."

"Yeah, neither do I!" She yelped as the water started to pull them sideways. It felt similar to a riptide, but they weren't near the coast, and riptides didn't just appear out of nowhere, right?

They fought against the current, but it kept dragging at them, so strong they couldn't fight against it. A sick feeling rose in Juno's stomach when he realized they were being swept towards the Tethys Expanse. But that was fine, it was just a weird pit, not actually *dangerous* —

"We're going towards the Expanse! I don't want to die there!" Rita

wailed. "It smells *so bad* !"

"Relax, Rita, we aren't going to die," Juno tried to reassure her.

Then the water let go, allowing them to drift in stunned silence a handful of meters away from the edge of the Expanse. The only sound was the soft murmur of ocean waves settling back into their usual rhythm.

"Is it over?" Rita asked. "What even was that?"

"I'm not sure, but I do know that we should go," Juno said, eyeing the sandy dropoff warily. Then the edge seemed to crumble in on itself, and chunks of sandy seabed dropped into the abyss.

Rita grabbed Juno and swam as fast as her little fins could take her. They took the long, long way back, swimming out into the open ocean and circling back around to the reef. After the seaquake, the calm of the open water was almost unsettling.

"I think that's just about enough adventurin' for me for today," Rita announced as they came to the office. "I'm taking a vacation."

Hyperion Reef was made of multiple separate sections, rising in a somewhat circular shape from the seabed. At the very bottom was dark and gloomy Oldtown, which Juno chose not to think about very often. His office was in the surface part of town, not too far from the center of the reef, Polaris Lagoon.

Although the storm above was intent on turning the sky into just another bit of sea, below, all the atmospheric fury was reduced to a dull roar and some aggressively waving seaweed.

"I'm gonna finally start watching that show Frannie’s been telling me about, and I'm gonna relax," Rita said mostly to herself.

"Yeah." Juno closed the door behind them and went into their makeshift kitchen. It had been a large closet when the agency opened, but proximity to Rita had converted the space into an extensive pantry. "Want any snacks?"

She snorted. "What kind of a question is that, boss?"

That was a yes, then. Juno rummaged around in the cabinets for something to eat, and he settled on something he knew Rita liked: moon-frosted double dolphin smax (with seahorse dreams).

"All the lightning is messin' with the reception!" Rita complained. "I just wanted to watch that new show about using thermal vents to cook. Is that too much to ask for?"

"Relax, I'll see what I can do about it." He offered her the bowl and started messing with the comms system.

She immediately smiled. "Aw, boss, you know me so well! That's my favorite! There's something about adding the seahorse dreams that really—"

Something crashed into the coral roof of the office. Rita yelped in surprise, forgetting to finish her sentence entirely. "What was that?!"

"Relax, it was probably just… uh…" Juno really couldn't come up with anything that it could have been that wouldn't freak her out even more. "Something harmless?"

"Can you go and look, please?" she asked tremulously, her eyes wide.

Juno sighed, "Alright, sure thing," and swam outside with a flick of his fins. The corals above their cave seemed unharmed, minus a few broken *Acropora* spines.

Then a shadow floated over Juno's head, and he darted backwards in an abrupt c-start, half-convinced it was a predator.

He squinted through the dark water. The shape didn't appear to be giving chase; in fact, it seemed more like driftwood than anything else. Juno swam up to the shape, still wary.

It was not, in fact, driftwood.

In Juno's defense, they didn't have the usual arrangement of limbs. The shape of the person was generically humanoid, but with a pair of large, albatross-like wings in creamy white barred with black, giving them a strangely shaped shadow. Their long, dark hair drifted in the water like seaweed.

"Hey, buddy, you okay there?" Juno called.

The person did not respond.

Juno tasted the tang of blood in the water, and it made his stomach churn. It took some doing to swim forward and actually check on whoever the hell crashed into his office.

They slowly sank in the water, bubbles of air escaping from their mouth and floating to the surface. Some kind of air-breather, but not a human. Wait.

*Air* -breather.

Juno grabbed the person around their waist and swam for the surface; their huge wings dragged something fierce, making Juno feel like he was swimming against a riptide. The waves crashing above them didn't help at all.

"Rita, come up here and give me a hand!" he yelled.

Together, they dragged the mostly-human to one of the shallower sections of the reef and managed to get his head above the water.

"Is he breathin'?" Rita asked.

"Uh," Juno said. He poked his head out of the water and squinted, eyesight blurry in the air. The air-breathing charm around his neck flared bright blue, and he could see the man coughing, water running down his chin.

"Yeah, he's alive," Juno reported. He surfaced again and tilted the man's head so he could breathe. "Who the hell *are* you?"

The man's hand gripped Juno's shoulder. His eyes slid open, an unearthly violet like nothing Juno had ever seen before. Then he slumped unconscious in Juno's arms. Or maybe he was dead?

"Rita! Wait, dammit," he muttered, shoving his face underwater again. "Rita, check him for injuries."

He caught a bubbly, "On it, boss!"

A wave washed over them, and Juno nearly lost his grip on the strange man.

"Hey, watch it!" Rita yelped. "He's got some scrapes and scratches, but nothing too nasty."

Well, that was good, but he had to get whoever this was to someplace safer. His first thought was an underwater cave, but that obviously wasn't going to work, unless…

"Can you do your magic thing and make this let him breathe water?" Juno asked. He took the charm off and held it out to Rita.

She frowned and didn't even respond before she started unraveling its magic, already muttering to herself about spell components.

Juno poked his head out of the water to check on the man; the air pretty much glued his gills closed without the charm, and he had to awkwardly reposition their bodies so he could support the man without having to touch the air. The man's wings were large enough to catch in the currents like the broad side of a sunfish. Juno slid one hand under the man's right wing and pressed his palm to the center of his back to get a better grip. The feathers were smooth and mysteriously dry under his touch.

"Got it, boss!" Rita pressed her finished charm into Juno's hand.

He slipped the necklace over the man's head, crossed his fingers, and nervously let him sink under the water. The blue magic flared to life, accented with Rita's golden sparks, and the man didn't immediately drown.

Juno flashed her a quick smile. "You're a genius, Rita."

"Yeah, and you could stand to say it more." She grinned back at Juno and hooked an arm around the man's shoulders. "Whaddya say we bring him inside?"

They managed to drag him inside without losing so much as a feather against the corals, although Rita grumbled about how much the guy weighed (not that much).

"I guess he can stay in the waiting room." Juno frowned, tail lashing back and forth.

"I'll patch up his scrape, Mistah Steel," Rita volunteered. She swam over and gently poked at a slowly forming bruise on the man's face.

The man jerked away from Rita, his eyes opening like he'd been hit. "Who the h—am I *underwater* ?" he demanded. His slim hands came up as if to guard from a blow, and sparkling purple magic flared in front of him.

Juno and Rita both went to jump in front of the other and ended up getting tangled in Juno's fins. The burst of weird magic washed over them, it but didn't seem to do anything.

"Rita, the fins—" Juno squeaked.

“Oh, sorry, boss, just a second—" She flailed like a fish caught in a net and made the situation immeasurably worse.

By the time they got untangled, the man was regarding them both with a slightly different gaze. Juno couldn’t read into the meaning, but he thought he liked it.

“I’m sorry about that, I just wanted to make sure there weren’t any illusions in play. It’s not every day that I find myself underwater, much less in the company of merfolk such as yourselves.” He reached up to fuss with his hair and found the loose black strands floating weightlessly above him. “Am I in an office?”

“Yeah, something like that. What’s your name?” Juno asked. Apparently, he'd sounded a bit rude, because Rita not-so-subtly smacked him with a flick of her tail.

"Rex Glass," he said with an easy smile. "And let me extend my apologies for crashing into your establishment. I must say, I am simply enchanted to meet you…" He looked expectantly at the both of them.

*Fine* . "Juno Steel, private eye. And this is my secretary—"

"Rita! Nice to meet you, Mistah Glaaaaaass," she sighed.

Was this Rex Glass really handsome enough to make Rita swoon?

Juno frowned. Conscious and underwater, he looked… alright. Granted, Rita would swoon over pretty much anyone given the chance.

Rex swam gracefully over to Juno. His wings were spread, and a single beat gave him enough momentum to come close enough to touch. From the shape of his wings, not much larger in span than height, Juno could tell he wasn't any kind of seabird. The few winged folk who did show up near the reef had longer, slimmer wings for extended flight.

"What were you doing this far out over the ocean, Glass?" Juno asked. "No offense." He knew Rita would be weaving a divining spell without even having to look.

"Oh, I was just traveling through. I thought I could make it through the storm, but I misjudged how long it would take me to circle the Expanse. The air currents are just terrible over there." Rex preened a few feathers fretfully.

Yellow energy sparked around Rita, turning her eyes solid gold. "He's lyin', boss," she reported.

"What? No, I—what is she doing?" Rex seemed, for the first time, deeply unsettled by the sunshine-yellow sparks floating around Rita.

"Just a divining spell," she explained as she wove the magic in the water. She showed him the glittering spell threaded between her fingers. "Whenever someone lies near me, I know about it. It's a thing I picked up with the boss being in the private investigation business and all."

Rex wriggled uncomfortably. "I mean, I had to get across the archipelago to Pallas rather quickly, you understand, so I took a risk. I do not willfully crash into detectives' offices."

Rita frowned and flicked her tail back and forth as the spell pulsed in her hands. "Well… that's true."

Juno mirrored her frown but didn't notice himself. "What was your business in Pallas?"

"Do you generally interrogate people who fall onto your buildings in the middle of a storm, Detective?" Rex asked, somewhere between flippant and haughty. "I hate to leave such attractive company, but I really must be on my way."

Juno sputtered, put off for a moment by potentially having been called attractive. He wasn't sure what he would say other than, "That seems suspicious," and didn't have much of a reason to hold Rex anyway.

Then a tremor shook the office, exactly like before. Rita squawked and dove behind Juno, the spell disintegrating in her hands like so many sandcastles at high tide. "Not again!"

"Rex, watch out for the—"

The movement of the water send them all sloshing into the far wall of Juno's office. Anything not nailed to the floor slid too, and one of Rita's bags of seaweed snacks burst open, flavoring the water with teriyaki sauce.

Juno slammed his head into the edge of his desk, but only enough to be annoying as hell. "Ow," he complained.

"D’you think there’s going to be another one? There haven't been any before this—oh, hey! Snacks!" Rita immediately lost her train of thought.

"Glass, you alive?" Juno asked, rubbing what would probably be an ugly bump on his head.

There was no response. Maybe he’d dashed off in the commotion, which would be typical. Juno had only known the man for about five minutes, and he knew that much.

Then he heard a scuffling from behind his desk, and a few glossy black feathers drifted through the water column.

"Glass?"

One of Rex's wings stuck out at an awkward angle, and he had the other one hunched protectively around one shoulder. His eyes were glazed, but he still had enough mental acuity to jerk backwards when Juno tried to approach.

Juno held a pacifying hand out to him. "Listen, I'm sorry for interrogating you before. Will you let me take a look at your wing?"

Rex's eyes focused on Juno, watching him intently, although he didn't move.

"Rita, can you help me out?" Juno hissed under his breath.

Rita paused in the middle of stuffing one of the floating seaweed snacks into her mouth. "Huh? Awww," she said, immediately melting when she saw Rex, "His poor widdle wing!"

Juno groaned. " *Rita* ."

"It's okay! We can have someone fix that right up for you! Do you want a snack in the meantime?" Rita bobbed unthreateningly forward, waving a piece of seaweed in one hand like a flag of surrender. "That always makes me feel better, and these are teriyaki flavor!"

Rex's eyes focused on the seaweed. "Do I want a *what* ?"

"The dazed and confused look isn't good on you, Glass, and Rita, I don't know if he can even eat that."

"Hm." Rita munched on the seaweed herself. "That's a good point, I didn't think of that."

"Rex, I just want to look at your wing. Can you trust me with at least that much?" Juno asked.

"Can I trust you," Rex muttered under his breath. Slowly, he relaxed his good wing and didn't protest when Juno drifted closer.

It was then that Juno remembered—he had no idea how to assess if a wing was broken or not. Visually, all of the bones appeared in order. The feathers were protected by Rita's reworked water-breathing spell, and they very gently repelled the water on Juno's hands. "Does it hurt at all?"

The wing flexed tentatively, and Rex hissed in pain. "Yes. I don't think I can fly, or at least, I don't want to try. I suspect you'll be stuck with me for some time yet, Detective."

"Do you want me to bandage it somehow? We could also find a healer —"

"It's not that badly injured," Rex said almost petulantly.

"Really? Because it seemed that way based on how you reacted."

"From what I saw, you hit your head on your desk. Do you want to see a healer about *that* ?"

"No, it's—hey, that isn't the same," Juno protested. "You were acting like you'd just gotten hit… over the head…"

Rex folded his wings against his back, looking far too smug for a man in his position.

"Forget it," Juno muttered under his breath.

"D'you think this quake was related to the other one?" Rita asked.

"The other one?" Rex tilted his head curiously.

"Rita!" Juno hissed.

"Boss!" she hissed back. "What *is* it?"

Rex still had that faintly amused look on his face, like he couldn't quite get enough of Rita and Juno. "Are seaquakes quite common in your area of the reef?"

"No," Juno admitted.

"But we think we might have a clue!" Rita waved the fragment of bone in the water so fast she made bubbles. "Look at this!"

Rex swam forward to inspect the bone; when he touched it, the magic in the fragment and his own reacted in a burst of purple and red sparks. "Oh my. That's quite impressive."

"We dunno what it does, though."

"Would you mind if I looked at it more closely?"

"Yes," Juno said at the same time Rita handed him the piece of bone with a cheerful, "Nah!"

Rex raised an eyebrow at Juno and somehow managed to make it look wonderfully elegant. "This is quite interesting," he said, of the bone but while looking at Juno. "It looks to me like some type of ancient binding magic, and one that’s coming rapidly undone."

"That's what I said before," Rita agreed. "But what was it for, exactly?"

Rex gave the fragment back to her. "I couldn’t tell you. Although I would be very curious to find out—where did you find it, exactly?"

"Oh, near that island out by the Tethys Expanse," Rita explained over Juno's grumbles of protest. "Come on, boss, sharing information is the best way to find out new things. I bet he knows all kinds of stuff," she said to Juno.

"The Tethys Expanse? Would that happen to be a large underwater sinkhole, with only dead air above? Smells like week-old rotting seaweed?" Rex asked.

Juno sighed. "Yeah. No waves on the surface."

He nodded sagely and said, "Yes, I know the place; my people call it the Ocean's Lake. It's almost impossible to fly over since there aren't any thermals, so you have to flap like a pigeon the whole way. Terrible."

"It's just as bad underwater, and no one knows what's down there because ain't nobody ever come back from looking," Rita told Rex with the eagerness of a kid telling a ghost story. "We were only over there because Juno found some weird junk."

"So why were you over there, if it's so hard to fly over—"

Rita elbowed Juno in the ribs. "Play nice."

"You know," Rex said thoughtfully, "I believe I've seen something like this before. Tell me, Detective, how familiar are you with the Archaeological Museum at the University of Pallas?"

Juno swam back a bit. "Listen…" He wanted to say, "Maybe you should go without me," but then how would he be able to tell if Rex's information was true, or even reliably gotten? Could he even trust this guy if he did go with him?

Juno chased the ideas around in his head for a bit and only made himself dizzy. At times like these, he always tried to rely on his own intuition, but something about Rex made his internal compass spin. Something about him seemed… *good* . Or, not good, but different. He couldn't tell exactly what that meant, and he found himself wanting to know.

"Well, Detective? I'm listening," Rex said. His wings were half-folded around him, black and white with a flash of cobalt.

"Never mind."

Rex smiled. "Then I think we have ourselves a date at the museum."

# The City

In the city of Pallas, Rex wore an entirely different face. He had the same sharpened teeth, but otherwise, Silas Blue bore no similarity whatsoever to Rex Glass. Even Rex's black-and-white magpie wings had shifted into the vibrant sapphires and emeralds of a seven-colored tanager, the undersides of his primary feathers darkening to black. His clothes were still elegant, shirt left open in the back and exposing smooth dark skin, but in green and gold.

Juno didn't have to worry about being recognized. True, the transmutation amulet had left him with scaly mermaid legs, but Rex was able to craft an illusion that made him look like he was wearing a long, peach-and-maroon dress. He could've passed for a normal human, except for the fact that he wasn't wearing shoes, because, pardon his language, *fuck* shoes. It took him longer than he would've liked to admit to sort out the walking-and-not-tripping thing, but he drew the line at shoes.

Rex—Silas—looped his arm around Juno's. "Well, Juno, what do you think about the city? Very different from Hyperion Reef?"

"Yeah, a bit."

Pallas was a human city, and humans seemed to have a predilection for spreading out horizontally. Rows and rows of low, ramshackle houses stretched into the dusty distance, the same color as the dirt paths of the city. But like Hyperion Reef, the center of the city felt like an entirely different place. The streets were swept clean by people you never saw, and each building was its own work of architecture and design. Not built, but crafted. It even smelled different there, clean like sweet hay.

They came to a stop in front of a marble building that stretched up into the sky, crowned with a golden dome that felt as wide as Polaris Lagoon. Here, all the people wore green robes edged in gold, some fancier than others.

Silas' outfit matched theirs, but with suitably fancy golden embroidery. "And here's our destination. You remember our cover story, yes?" he asked.

"I do… darling." The word felt leaden in Juno's mouth.

"Wonderful!" Silas smiled in a way that did not belong to Rex Glass. "Let's go inside. I think even you'll find some beauty in there."

"Yeah, well, it's a museum, just some dusty… old…" Juno trailed off.

Inside, the building looked exactly like a forest. Trees sprung up from the mossy, uneven ground, stretching up dozens of feet into the dome. Little glowing mushrooms were dotted along paved granite pathways through the forest. Some of the paths led to firefly-lit glades that held bookcases, shelves, and glass cases of artifacts. People, some citizens, others scholars in green and gold robes, wandered through the woods as if they were actually outside. A few were even having picnic lunches in the artifact glades.

Juno reached out to the closest tree and felt a leaf—it was a living thing, not just an imitation. "I thought this was an archaeology museum, not a botanical garden. Are we even in the right place?"

"Of course we are! This is the atrium of the Silvan wing, which concentrates on the history of the Silvan elves. They wanted it to be atmospheric." Silas gestured vaguely to indicate the entire living forest behind him. "Come on, Detective, no time to waste! I think you'll like what you see."

Silas led Juno deeper into the museum. The forest slowly morphed into the sandy dunes of a coastline, dotted with grasses and beach flowers. Artifacts were kept in glass cases that seemed to rise from the dunes themselves, sand clinging to them where they touched the dunes. For some reason, there were a lot of swan motifs, including a giant swan boat.

"The Falmari elves. I really don't know how they manage to put up with all that sand." Silas smiled, and Juno found himself smiling back. "Sorry to rush you through all this, but we shouldn't linger here too long. Time a-wasting, and all."

Down on the beach proper, scattered shells dotted the soft white sand. There were even tide pools, with sea urchins and starfish and tiny fish that darted between the rocks. Ancient merfolk artifacts were kept in pools covered by glass, and in the largest pool, an entire excavated settlement had been preserved for viewing. Juno wondered for a moment if one of his ancestors had lived there, what they had been like.

"So, uh, when are we going to see that evidence?" Juno asked, breaking the quiet of the beach.

Silas had wandered away to one of the smaller pools and was frowning down at its contents. "I think… perhaps we will not see it after all."

Juno moved to look, and saw a neatly-written card that said the artifacts had been removed for cleaning, and would be back by the end of the month. "What's supposed to be in here?"

"Mostly? Artifacts of abjuration magic, which only merfolk can practice. There were supposed to be fragments of a spell similar to the one you found near Juventas Island. If they belonged to the same spell, then they would resonate with each other." Silas shook his head.

"Then we should get out of here." The warm sunshine of the merfolk wing seemed a lot less inviting now.

"You don't want to keep looking? Well… I suppose we should move on, either way."

"Yeah. Tell me about what you wanted to find."

Silas hummed. "Alright, then. It's the remains of a very old spell. Actual facts about it are few and far between, but what is known for sure is that it bound an immensely powerful creature. Unlike most spells, it was both woven and sung. It is also most certainly the last great abjuration spell ever woven."

"Oh."

"Detective, you never mentioned, so pardon me if I ask—what's your magic type?"

"That's personal," Juno snapped, crossing his arms and hoping the conversation would stop.

"Well, as you know, I'm an illusionist. I think it quite suits me." Silas smiled and let purple light flicker around him, shifting his face into Rex's and back again.

Juno grunted. "Yeah."

"I wonder what school of magic would suit you the best. I'd imagine that whatever it is, you're quite talented at it, aren't you? I don't think divination matches your style. You like the challenge of solving a puzzle rather than simply finding the answer with a bit of magic. Besides, you can't divine your way through anything." Silas hummed

thoughtfully. "Transmutation isn't quite right either."

They walked in silence for a moment.

"I think I know! It's really quite obvious, isn't it? I've seen how protective you are of Rita. You must be an abjurer."

"Yeah, and what if I am?" he demanded, turning on Silas. His dress swirled around him, peach and maroon, just like his fins would have underwater. How the hell had Silas even known that? Juno's stomach twisted, and he couldn't tell if it was nerves or anger. Maybe both.

"Really? You are? I was half-joking myself. I thought that school of magic had been lost centuries ago! That is truly remarkable."

Something about Silas' words struck Juno as strange; not lies, but not entirely true, either. "I don't even know anything about it."

"You were never taught by your parents?" Silas didn't seem too interested now, but Juno couldn't shake the idea that he wanted to know for some reason other than idle curiosity. "Even I learned illusion magic from my father."

Did Juno detect the smallest hesitation on the word 'father'? Probably his imagination. He was overanalyzing things again. "Yeah, well, not everyone should use magic. Everyone would be much happier if I kept it to myself, including me."

That had the unintended effect of making Silas even more interested. "I can hardly believe that. We're quite literally magical creatures, Detective—magic is in the name. And surely abjuration is one of the more useful classes—"

Juno scowled. "Some magic should be left alone. Mine included."

"All right, I shan't press a sore point." Silas flexed his wings, making the quills stick up a bit. "But I think Rita and I could coach you, if you wanted to give it some thought. There's no harm in—"

"Believe me, there's plenty of harm. Now can we drop it?" he snapped. He wished he still had a tail to lash back and forth.

"Yes, of course."

"Let's just go back to the reef."

"Hello! Are you enjoying our collection?"

Silas visibly flinched, and Juno jumped about a foot into the air. "What?" Juno yelped.

A halfling in green robes edged with purple smiled up at Juno. "Sorry to surprise you. I was just inquiring after your museum experience."

"Oh, uh, 's fine. Good? Very nice," Juno said, trying to remember how to smile. "My… husband… and I are visiting Pallas for the first time, and we heard a lot of great things about this museum."

The halfling seemed content with this answer. "You can ask me any questions you have about the collection. You know," he said, aside, "I have been taking care of artifact acquisition for over seven hundred years."

Juno's brow wrinkled. "I'm sorry, what? But you—I thought—"

"Hamid?"

"Silas! I thought that was you, but I wasn't sure. How long has it been?" Hamid gave Silas a big hug, which only went about as high as Silas' waist.

"Oh, surely not that long, you've hardly changed," Silas said with a laugh, hugging Hamid back. He examined the halfling a bit closer. "You really haven't changed. At all."

Juno frowned. Was that a hint of jealousy about Hamid's appearance? But Silas was an illusionist, who could look however he wanted. Must have been his imagination.

"Neither have you. Almost enough to make me suspect you're like me!" Hamid joked. "Who's this with you?"

Silas reached out and took Juno's hand. "This is my husband, Juno Steel." The lie felt so natural, even Juno believed it.

Hamid's jaw dropped in surprise, but he quickly kept talking, evidently not that surprised. "Wow, it has been awhile. It's so nice to meet you, Juno! My name is Hamid Saleh Haroun al-Tahan. When was the wedding? You *have* to tell me what you were wearing."

"Of course, but maybe another time?"

"Right, plenty of time to catch up. Well, at least for me." Hamid smiled, and Juno noticed that his eyes were an unearthly shade of

green. "What brought you back to the university museum after all this time?"

Juno shot a look at Silas that meant, *Don't say a thing* .

"It had to do with the artifacts in case M266. We may have found a… related item."

Hamid frowned. "Those spell shards are before even my time. What exactly did you find?"

Juno gave Silas another look that meant, *Seriously, don't say anything!*

"Another shard." Silas held out the Juventas fragment willingly.

"Mind if I?" Hamid asked, one hand already hovering above the piece of bone. Yellow divining magic skittered over his hands, but with a metallic sheen rather than a bright glow, like polished brass. "Well, I can't say definitively if they're the same spell, but they are similar in quality and strength. Even in style, which has a counter-clockwise swirl knot to tie the phrases together rather than a two-in-hand, or a butterfly, which was common in the eras between—sorry, rambling again."

Juno stopped himself from snatching the artifact back. "So, do you know what spell this is?"

"Oh, yes. The last great abjuration spell ever cast. The school never recovered, and I doubt there are any practitioners left alive. Where did you find this?"

"By the Hyperion Reef."

"Of course! The Hyperion Reef, how did I not—Silas, I must accompany you back there. Finally, I might be able to find out why they cast the spell, and where! I could get a lot of papers out of this," Hamid reflected. "And my postgrads could wring a few PhDs out of it too."

"Listen, I don't think that's going to work," Juno tried to explain. "The site is underwater, and pretty far away—"

"Revisiting the scene of the crime? I thought you were a better thief than that, Shah."

A slimy feeling crawled up Juno's spine, and he almost didn't want to

turn around to see who had spoken.

"Oh, fuck," Silas sighed under his breath. "I knew we should have moved faster."

Juno risked a glance behind him.

A figure draped in rotting, greyish fabric had appeared on the dunes, only their mouth visible. Although their skin was almost the same color as their clothes, mottled with dark spots that mimicked the rot. "Well, thank you for bringing the abjurer to me. He will suit my needs perfectly." *Come along, Juno Steel,* the same voice said, but this time, in his head. Like they were right between his ears.

Juno and Hamid said, "What?!" at the same time.

Something about this person, whoever they were, would've made Juno's fins ruffle if he'd had any. Their mouth worked, lips wormy and uncomfortably wet. They raised a hand towards Juno, almost as if in salute.

He reached out for Silas' hand.

Pure white sparks of magic swirled up from the sand, and Juno jerked backwards instinctively. The magic followed him, climbing up his dress and clinging to him like cobwebs, making his skin sting like a salted wound. "What the fuck is this? Rex? What—" Then the magic covered his eyes, and his vision turned to white.

He tried to open his eyes and found they were already open, filled with multicolored specks of light. Slowly, the dripping walls of some kind of cave resolved through the splotches. Was this even happening? Maybe he'd been out of the water too long. But then why would Hamid have reacted to the appearance of the figure in rags?

"Silas—Rex—?"

Fuck, it was dark in this cave. Where was Rex? Was anyone else even here? Juno's breath was too loud in his ear. Maybe he was panicking. Was he panicking?

"Juno?" A hand slipped into Juno's. "Juno, it's me, it's going to be—"

"What have you been doing, Perseus Shah? Looks like I can't trust you to get a simple job done after all," the figure accused in their rough, gravelly voice. "Don't worry. You'll regret it."

"Glass, if we're in prison, I'm not gonna be a happy camper," Juno said loudly.

The person in grey laughed like they were auditioning for 'evil villain' in a kid's cartoon, and the sound vanished as white light flared. Juno couldn't remember which school white was… was it even a school?

Whoever they were, they'd left Juno and Rex in a room hewn entirely from the rock, maybe by water, a long, long time ago. No doors or exits, just smooth shale—a very effective jail cell.

"You'd better answer me," Juno threatened.

After a moment, dots of purple light floated through the cavern—the dissolving illusion of Silas Blue fading away.

"It isn't what it looks like, Detective—"

"Yeah? What do you think it—who the fuck was that lady? Was she psychic? Is that even possible? Also, Perseus Shah? That your real name? Also, and I mean this very sincerely, *what?* "

"That was Miasma."

The name made Juno's skin crawl.

Rex sighed. "And yes, from what I understand, she can both hear thoughts and manipulate them. She knows things about me that she should *not* ."

"Don’t see why you’re so put out about it. Looks a hell of a lot like you were hired to bring me to this Miasma lady—"

Rex shook his head emphatically. "I was, at first, but not anymore. Haven't you been paying attention?"

At this point, Juno was not in the mood for excuses. "You're just in this for yourself."

"Miasma offered me significant rewards to help her, but once I found out what she really wanted—"

"It just melted your soft little heart, didn't it—"

"Juno, please don't interrupt me." Rex looked exhausted for the first time since Juno had met him. He ran one hand through his thick black hair. The purple sparks of his magic had faded, leaving only the sickly

green glow of bioluminescent cave fungi to light the room. "I stole the fragments from the museum. That was my first job for Miasma, to prove that I could be useful to her. Then she asked me to follow and monitor a… certain individual—"

"Me, you mean."

"Juno, please. Yes, it was you. I didn't know why, only that she was interested in knowing your abilities. Aside from a real penchant for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, you didn't seem to have any special abilities." Rex started worrying at one of his primary feathers. "I didn't think you were an abjurer because, you know, statistics, but then I saw you, at Juventas Island."

When Juno had tried to help Rita. "And you told Miasma, which is why we're here."

"No, if you remember, I was *going* to tell her. Then I crashed into your roof," Rex said, miffed. "And then I saw the artifact you found. I was hoping we would have more time before she caught on."

"Time? For *what* ?"

Rex tried for a smile. "Time to maybe fix all of this."

"Give me a single reason to trust you, and I might go along with it," Juno spat.

"I trust you."

Juno scoffed. "Easy for you to say."

"You have no other choice other than to sit and wait for Miasma to come back."

"That's looking pretty attractive." Juno really wished he'd known about this earlier, so he could have found out who this Miasma even was. Maybe find out if she had any weaknesses.

"You don't even know what she wants with you." Rex shook his head and stood up, pacing in their cell. His long legs took the whole space in about three strides. "Juno, you may very well be the last abjurer left in the world's ocean. You are the only one who could theoretically stop her from freeing the creature."

"I am *not* learning how to use magic."

"Juno, she will use your magic to break what's left of the abjuration spell keeping that monster trapped. Records say it was destructive, uncontrollable, and powerful enough that it couldn't be killed. The abjuration mages of old literally died to bind whatever it was. I stuck with you because… well… helping you might be my only chance of stopping her."

"Oh." Juno looked up at Rex's silhouette, famed against the eerie green light of their cavern prison. "Your wing is fine, isn't it?"

"Yes." Rex tried to stretch, but the room was too small for him to completely extend his wings. "This room is very small."

Juno ducked around Rex's wings, pressing against the unfortunately slimy wall of the room. "Is there even a way to stop her?"

"I'm not sure. I think that if you empower the spell again, put all of your magic into it, then it won't crumble. It's been so long that the spell is finally degrading, which is giving her a chance to free the creature."

Juno restlessly worried at the hem of his dress. "That sounds great, but I don't know a damn thing about magic. And I don't want to—look, isn't it all a bit convenient that I'm the only person who can—this is all happening to me because of—I can't—I shouldn't do magic. Not when so much depends on it."

"I assure you; this is one situation when you have to do magic. And I happen to be something of an expert," Rex said with a flourish of sparkling purple light. "All you have to do is trust me, Detective."

# The Abyss

"What are you going to do if I do close my eyes, Glass? If that's even your name?"

"Juno."

"Fine, fine." Juno closed his eyes.

"Let your mind be still. Picture a white circle in a black expanse."

Juno tried his best to imagine a circle.

"The circle contains your magic. It is completely contained within the circle. If you reach out, you can feel sparks of it like the warmth of a fire. They want to be with you, to keep you warm."

"Rex, I don't—"

"Juno, it won't work if you don't let it. I thought you said you were going to at least try."

"Whatever."

"Reach into the circle and pull a single spark free."

Juno resisted the need to stretch out his actual hands. He tried, genuinely tried, for what felt like at least an hour. What was he even doing? He'd messed around with this power before and look what had happened. He tried not to think about his brother, but the memories were so close to the surface…

Abjuration magic was supposed to protect. Bind, shield, whatever. Instead of Rex's stupid circle, Juno saw his mother's face in his mind, her once-pretty features twisted with anger.

If Juno hadn't always made her so angry, if Juno hadn't been there, if Ben hadn't been Juno's twin, if Juno had gotten maybe a really crazy haircut so they weren't so similar, if, if, if. What it boiled down to was that Juno had been there. The red glow of magic had been in the water, maybe Juno's, maybe someone else's. He'd wanted to protect Ben, hadn't he?

Juno's face burned with shame and anger. Maybe all he'd wanted was to make her pay back just a fraction of what she owed them. Maybe

he'd *wanted* to hurt someone.

Red sparks in the water. Sarah's and Juno's.

Sometimes, Juno kidded himself into thinking there was Ben's blue magic too.

If he did manage to call up a spark of magic, he'd just hurt someone again. Maybe Rita, Rex, someone else.

Fuck, he'd almost hurt Rita trying to protect her. He hadn't been able to process that. She was one of the only people in the whole ocean who cared about him, and he'd almost…

Not again.

Juno clenched his hands and tried to turn his thoughts off. "That didn't work. Next."

Rex looked absolutely delighted. "I saw red light, for just a moment. I think that if you keep working on it—"

For a second, Juno wanted to punch Rex's perfect face, and he felt the heat of magic flare under his skin. "I'll be able to summon a fucking firefly, great. How is that going to help me keep an ancient evil chained inside the Expanse? Let's just fucking wait for Miasma."

Rex was patient and calm, as ever. How did he manage to do that? What was his secret? "All you need to empower the spell again is the ability to summon your magic forth on command. From what I understand, at the moment, you can only do that when your emotions get the better of you."

"Then hit me when it's time, or whatever," Juno muttered, getting up from the floor. "This isn't going fast enough."

"Juno, I'm not going to hit you," Rex remonstrated. "I think if we just —does it seem lighter in here to you?"

"Oh, you don't think…?" Juno caught the glow of magic in the darkness; not purple or red, white.

*Hello, Juno Steel* , Miasma said in Juno's ear, like she was standing right next to him. White magic shone around her, painting the room with harsh shadows.

"You again? What are you even trying to do? Why do you even have

us here?" Juno demanded, trying desperately to get Miasma to monologue. Maybe if they had five more minutes to figure out something, anything?

"You wouldn't understand."

"Yeah? Try me."

"I want you to stop talking. I want everyone to be *silent* ," she hissed, her face so close to Juno's that he could smell her breath. Was that soup? "Then I might actually be able to *think* ."

"Oh, well, in that case, I can—"

"You think too loud, Abjurer. Everyone, always thinking about their petty little lives, what they're going to wear to work." She said the words without any real venom, and her flat, rasping tone sounded worse than any way she could have shouted.

"Then let us go, problem solved. We won't bother you—" *while you destroy the world to get some me-time* , Juno was about to finish.

Miasma raised a hand, and lines of white magic wrapped around Juno and Rex. When they tightened, Juno felt like he was about to be sliced apart by razor wire. "I may need your magic, abjurer. And Perseus, you will be able to see what you helped me to do." Miasma summoned another cloud-white portal, so bright it hurt to look at.

At least Juno would get to see the sun again.

—

Wherever they landed, it was fucking night.

But Juno was underwater, which let him dispel the magic that disguised him as a human. This also let him taste the water, which wasn't clean and fresh like he'd expected; it tasted pretty gross, actually, like… rotten fish.

"How many times have you swum around the Tethys Expanse, little mermaid? Did it ever cross your mind what was at the bottom?" Miasma asked, almost teasing. "Now you'll know."

She gestured once, and light illuminated the bottom of the Tethys Expanse. Fragments of bone and rock littered the sand. They were so far down that the pressure should have been getting to them, but Juno could pick out a circle of glowing red rocks around them. It looked like another ancient abjuration spell, keeping the area at a pressure that wouldn't squash them into pancakes. It also helped keep them from freezing to death in the cold of the deep sea. Rita would have appreciated the craft that went into the boundary.

Juno was so caught up in figuring out how to bring her there that it took him awhile to process the rest of the scene.

The bone fragment he'd found had come from the skeleton of something that could have eaten a humpback whale like Rita ate a handful of salmon jerky. The vault of its vast ribcage arched over the entire circle like a cage, and thin lines of glowing red light wove through the bones. The red lines twisted through the water in strange, arcane shapes before knotting together in the center of the circle. A long spear carved from bone pinned the knot to the sea floor, keeping the entire spell anchored.

Juno half-expected to see the remains of ancient merfolk around the spear, but they'd disintegrated long ago into the muck of the bottom of the ocean. He did see the remains of ancient ships, long since wrecked. They'd been preserved in the deep, cold water, but the movement of the creature buried down here had broken them apart and caused some of the pieces to get spat up near Juventas Island.

Miasma drifted forward in the water, her bare human legs kicking up the sand. She didn't say anything as she reached out to pull the spear from the center of the circle. It was hard to believe that a single piece of bone had kept some unearthly creature trapped for hundreds of years, and even harder to think that Miasma could undo it all in a second.

Then something hit the ground next to her. Then another thing, and another—the legs of some giant creature. It was bigger than even the animal whose ribcage they were standing in, a true sea monster.

Miasma dodged away from it, swimming back from the spear as a leg slammed down beside her seemingly out of nowhere. She didn't get hit, but she did lose her grip on the spell holding Rex and Juno captive.

Juno tried to find where it was coming from, maybe an eye,

something to attack, but there was too much sand and muck in the water to see properly.

Were they too late? Juno's stomach sunk as he thought about this monster smashing apart the delicate corals of Hyperion Reef—where would it start first? Would Rita hear it from Polaris Lagoon as it destroyed the outer reaches? Maybe her stream signal would cut out, and she'd swim out to see what was wrong…

Then Juno saw Rex, eyes closed, concentrating. Purple magic hung in the water around his hands.

This wasn't real, just another one of Rex Glass's patented illusions. And that was when Juno realized the creature wasn't generating any currents in the water. Also, he figured the thing would probably have smelled pretty bad.

"While she's distracted," Rex hissed.

"Right! Right, I got this." Juno's fins all fluttered together.

"Yes, you have this. Now go, I can't hold this for much longer!"

Juno didn't need telling twice.

Miasma tried to cast the same white lines around the creature that she'd used to hold Rex and Juno, but the magic just whistled through empty air. She looked back at them, confused, then angry, and she stretched out her hand. She knew exactly what they were doing. Her features twisted with rage, and Juno's stomach flipped.

White magic glowed in the cloudy water. White, not red, it was just white.

"Juno, now! You have to—now!" Rex shouted. His illusion burst into purple sparks and faded into the dark.

Juno darted forward, leaving Rex behind, fuck, don't think about that, and grabbed the disintegrating spear of bone in the center of the diagram. "Come on," he muttered under his breath. "Just a little, come on!" The spell fizzled in the water around his hands, but it was still fading away, the last dregs of energy that had sustained it nearly exhausted. He yelled, the anger like fire under his skin, but it wasn't *enough* . Where was his magic when he actually needed it?

The panic on Miasma's face melted into something far too smug for

Juno's taste. "Oh, little mermaid. You really are useless, aren't you? Even *I* don't need you to complete my task."

"NO!" Juno yelled as Miasma caught Rex in her threads of white magic and flung him into the bone structure of the spell circle.

Why wasn't it working? *Useless* . He was so fucking pathetic. When it mattered, he just couldn't do a single damn thing.

Juno let go of the spear.

"The sea will rise," Miasma rasped. The ancient magic keeping the spear in place crumbled like so much sandcastle at high tide, and she pulled it free easily.

Red sparks drifted to the seabed, and the giant ribcage disintegrated into the water.

The seafloor shook, chunks of it cracking and crumbling as something deep beneath the muck and coral stirred. Juno saw tentacles, armored on the top with serrated suction cups underneath, but so enormous they didn't seem like they could belong to a living thing. It had ten legs that were unfathomably large, but also exactly like a crab's, so that was easier to get a handle on. But the turtle shell on its back? Maybe this was why ancient peoples thought the world moved on the back of a turtle.

There was no way anyone could fight this thing.

And it was all his fault, *again* . Although this time, he figured a whole lot more people were going to blame him for this one. He tasted copper in the water and saw reddish blood blossom in the water from where Miasma's magic had cut into his skin.

"Glass?"

Rex drifted through the water, not even trying to swim. The ragged edges of a few feathers floated around him.

Juno moved towards him slowly, the water stinging the cuts in his arms and fins. The dorsal fin especially would take a long time to heal; what a fucking pain. Juno reached out and grabbed Rex by his shirt before he hit the seafloor.

He blinked hazily up at Juno. "Did you do it?"

"I—um—no, I didn't. The opposite, actually."

Rex smiled, pulling his wings close around Juno. "That's okay, I know you tried."

The monster under the sand roared so loud it shook the water and made Juno and Rex let go of each other. Even though it was bursting out from the spell with all its might, only a small piece of it had actually emerged; a handful of tentacles, each one as long as the Hyperion Reef was deep.

"Finally, it will all be gone. Just me and my magic, in peace, forever." Miasma gazed up at the creature with only adoration.

The tentacles disappeared into the darkness beyond the circle of protective runestones, churning the ribcage into dust. Something crunched and ground in the distance, and then chunks of rock the size of Juno's entire office crashed to the sea floor, sending up plumes of muck dozens of feet into the air.

"Time to leave," Miasma said, drawing her white magic around her again to teleport away.

"We have to get to her!" Rex grabbed Juno's hand and held onto him tight.

"Yeah, no kidding, Glass!"

They swam towards her as fast as they could, dodging tentacles the size of buildings.

The creature heaved itself out of the earth in a wave that pushed Juno, Rex, and Miasma up in the water. Too late for anyone to do anything to stop it.

Then it settled down on the sea floor, tentacles pulling around it.

"You're free now!" Miasma shouted. "Go, destroy everything!"

A large eye appeared in the mass of armored tentacles, bigger than Juno was tall, shining bright red. Some ancient unknown intelligence lurked behind that gaze, and it pinned Miasma in place. The creature heaved itself off the ground and started to swim up towards the surface.

Miasma winked at Juno and disappeared in a burst of white light.

"We have to get out of here before the place collapses—" Rex tried to swim up, and Juno grabbed him by the ankle.

"Wait, we can't just go up that fast. Hang on." Juno swam down and pried one of the red runestones free. "Okay, now we can go. If we try to ascend too fast—"

"Yes, yes, you can explain the physics of it to me later."

Even though Juno was the swimmer, technically, Rex was still faster underwater when he beat his wings. They rose out of the circle of light at the bottom of the Expanse, into the grey twilight of the open sea. Juno held tight to the pressure runestone, and their blood didn't turn into nitrogen. Finally, they rose into the daylit waters, where the water was fresh and clear. It looked like they'd surfaced near Juventas Island.

"No!" Miasma was shouting. "What do you think you're doing?"

All of the monster's tentacles had rooted in the sea floor, and the enormous shell on its back pushed out of the water like an island. Its massive head bowed, eyes closing, as it settled into its new home.

Miasma lashed out at the creature, like she could force it to move. "I don't believe this. How could all the stories have been wrong? My research was perfect!"

The creature cracked open one eye, locking its gaze with Miasma.

Maybe she thought she could teleport away, maybe she thought the creature would understand it owed her its freedom.

It flicked a single one of its tentacles, and she disappeared. And not in a pretty, magical way. In a way that made Juno swear to never squish another jellyfish again, even if it was in his office.

He did not want to think about what she looked like now.

With an enormous sigh that sent waves fifteen feet tall surging into the sea, the monster relaxed into the seabed. A single curious seagull fluttered down from the sky and tentatively landed on one of the massive spikes protruding from the shell.

"So the sea monster of legend was just trying to find somewhere to settle down," Rex said reflectively.

"Yeah, yeah," Juno said, waving his hand in the water.

"I can't believe they misunderstood it so completely. In the end, it was just another innocent sea creature, making its way through the world."

"I mean, it's so big it makes blue whales look like so much chum. Even if it didn't mean to destroy everything, it could have. Better to kill it and be safe." Juno crossed his arms.

"You don't honestly believe that, do you, Detective?"

Juno didn't like this look Rex was giving him. Was it sad, disappointed? "I'm just saying, I would've done the same as the spellcasters who trapped it."

Rex shook his head. "It didn't mean any harm."

"Well, it could have done any number of horrible things! It could have destroyed the entire reef where I live, fuck knows what else, before it found the right place to settle down. That's evil, and it deserved to be trapped." Juno willed his fins to hold still for a single damn second.

"Juno—"

"I don't care what it meant to do!" he yelled, red light swirling through his fins as they ruffled. " *It doesn't matter* . It was still a threat, a *monster* !"

He should have really known better. The same shockwave of red burst around him, the wall of energy catching Rex off-guard and slamming him backwards.

Juno flitted forward to help, then pulled back, wrapping his arms around himself and holding the runestone to his chest. "R—Rex, are you okay? I'm sorry, I—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it."

"I'm fine, Juno," Rex said with a sharp-toothed smile.

Juno tasted blood in the water.

"I know you didn't mean it. It was just an accident, Juno, it happens to everyone."

"—To *everyone* ? Rex, I k—" Juno shook his head and couldn't say anything more.

"Your ability is to shield, Juno, to protect." Rex moved forward,

reaching out a scraped hand to Juno. "All you're doing is protecting yourself."

He flinched away from Rex's hand. "I hurt you, and you were just… we just... I hurt everyone. Not on purpose. I don't know why I thought I could do anything good."

"Oh, Juno." Even Rex's relentless optimism dimmed for a moment. "You helped save the reef, didn't you?"

"I didn't help. The situation resolved itself."

Rex slowly reached out to Juno, and when he didn't pull away, he gently held one of Juno's hands. "It turned out that the monster wasn't really a monster after all. I bet the magicians who imprisoned it really frightened it."

"Rex, please," Juno said hoarsely. "I don't think I want to talk about this anymore." He was caught between pulling away and—and what? Thankfully, Rex let go after a moment, but somehow that left Juno disappointed.

"Of course. I—I didn't mean to make you upset, before. I'm sorry."

"You're s—I should be the one who's sorry, I hit you!" Juno felt like he should at least give the man a pat on the shoulder, but now he couldn't figure how to do it casually.

"Well, and as you can see, there isn't even a scratch on me." Rex smiled, sunny as always, even though Juno could see purple magic sparkling over where there had definitely been bruises. "Oh, we have company."

He heard Rita before he saw her, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Boss!" she shouted. "Oh, boy, when you didn't come back, I was so worried! I was hopin' you might be here, 'cause I can't look on land. What happened, why didn't you come back?"

"I'll explain it to you in a bit." Juno reached out to hook an arm over her shoulders, and she dove into a hug instead.

"I missed ya too, boss." She gave him a tight squeeze, like she knew he needed it. "It was real quiet in the office without you, even with both of the stream screens on."

"Yeah, uh, sorry about that. But look what we got you." Juno started to hold out the runestone, and she grabbed it out of his hands eagerly.

"This is so incredible!" She pored over the stone, golden magic sparkling around her. "Oh, man, wait 'til Frannie sees this! Oh, there's lots of them swirl knots, huh?" She swam away, chattering to herself about spellcraft.

Rex spread his wings, hovering in the water column. "Well… I think it's time for me to move on. As much as I enjoy spending time with you."

"I mean, if that's what you want." Juno tried to smile.

Rex swam up to the surface, and Juno followed. "I suppose I won't need this anymore," he said, taking off the water-breathing necklace.

"Keep it. You never know, you might need it again." Juno bit down on his lip to keep himself from adding, "In case you visit me."

Rex tucked the necklace into his pocket. "If you insist." He fluffed his wings and fluttered up to perch on a chunk of coral that poked out of the lagoon. "Juno, I prefer to keep my secrets. But I fear that I may have left you on uneven footing."

"I know that you're not exactly an open book, Rex, but in case you forgot, you helped defeat an ancient evil with me, more or less."

"Yes, well." He looked at his hands for a moment before he said, "I still wanted to tell you, before I go—you were right. My name isn't really Rex Glass. My name is Peter Nureyev."

Juno had to stop himself from grinning like an idiot. "Huh." Honestly, it wasn't as surprising as he might've thought. It felt almost as if Rex—Peter—were giving him a gift, something precious, more than just a name. "Peter Nureyev. S'a good name, I… I like it. Hey, is that what you really look like?"

"I don't think you're ready to know," Peter said, probably trying to come off as mysterious. Purple illusion magic spiraled around him, not changing anything, but shining in the evening light. "I think I should be off. Plenty of thermals to soar and clouds to fly through and all, plus I need to let Hamid know that we didn't get murdered."

"Oh, yeah, of course. I'll see you around then. Peter."

The setting sun shone behind Peter and gilded his wings in amber fire, each feather caught like onyx in gold. "Goodbye, Juno." In a wingbeat, Peter was flying away, towards the mainland. In his wake, a single dark feather that drifted down to land on the ocean's surface.

Juno let the feather sink into his hands, the barbs already turning soft in the water. "Peter Nureyev," he muttered to himself. He tucked the feather behind his ear. "I hope that wasn't the last time I ever see you."

—

Hyperion Reef. Juno knew every single coral by heart, it seemed. The way everyone knew their home, no surprises left in the whole place. He tweaked the tentacles of an anemone, waving its delicate fronds in the sea currents. A tiny clownfish poked its head out, took one look at Juno, and darted back inside.

The reef was a full-color painting, rising higher than any building on land, little fish and shrimp flitting between the rocks like birds in the trees. There was Rita's favorite place to buy swordfish steaks, there was the street where he'd caught a cleaner shrimp smuggler, and there was his apartment. Juno drifted up to his office, the corals just a few scant inches from the surface of the water.

How could he leave all of this?

A shadow passed overhead, and he could have sworn he heard a person's voice call out.

Juno poked his head out of the water. "Hello?"

"Hello, Juno." Peter Nureyev fluttered down to perch on a bit of coral that protruded from the ocean. "Did you miss me?"

"Did—wh—why are you here? It's been weeks, I thought you were..." *Gone* .

Peter's wings folded against his back. "I just couldn't stay away. Also, and you're not going to believe this, I found something you might be interested in."

The edge of Juno's mouth moved in what might have been a smile.

"You know what, Peter? Maybe later. You should come inside, Rita's just getting a stream ready. It's about something really dumb I don't care about, but we're going to watch it together. You could join us if you wanted."

Peter slipped into the water, and his perfectly coiffed hair drifted with the motion of the waves. "At this rate, I'll be wishing to have been born a cormorant. Possibly even a penguin."

"In tropical waters? You wish." Juno opened the door to his office.

"Yes, I do wish."

"Oh, Mistah Glass!" Rita exclaimed from inside. "You want some of these? One hundred percent pure shrimp!"

"Ah, I'm allergic to shrimp."

"How about these? Just seaweed and sesame seeds! Or these, they're tuna!" She plied Peter with about a half-dozen different snacks.

"Hey, easy, don't smother the guy," Juno interrupted.

"What, I'm just asking!"

Peter smiled, and so did Rita.

Juno waited for the catch, but it never came.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! This is my first ever TPP fic, and it was written for the 2020 Penumbra MiniBang. Check out the other stories in the collection! Art by @crowva on Tumblr.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!